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ABSTRACT

This research brief recaps a study of a perceived shortage of qualified individuals capable of filling educational administrator positions. There has been a perception that mass numbers of administrators are about to retire or are being lured into other careers, and that schools and districts are having difficulty finding qualified people to replace those who leave. The study reviewed and analyzed existing data and found little evidence of a nationwide crisis in the market for certified school administrators. The study revealed the following. The number of administrators is stable though the group is aging. There is little evidence that school administrators are being lured into other career fields. Principals are not fleeing schools serving disadvantaged students. Overall, individuals appear to have incentives to move into and through the administrative career path. The study also identified several key areas of concern: a significant portion of the administrative population nearing retirement, substantial variation in career incentives on the state and local levels, and barriers to entry that affect teachers' willingness to become school administrators. (WFA)

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RAND Research Brief

EDUCATION

Are Schools Facing a Shortage of Qualified Administrators?

The recently passed No Child Left Behind legislation underscores the growing visibility and importance of school leadership in the larger education reform effort. State and federal governments are increasing accountability requirements for schools and districts and relying on those in formal leadership positions to promote improvement. Some policymakers, however, are concerned that there is or may soon be a shortage of qualified individuals capable of filling administrative positions and doing these jobs well. The concern stems primarily from the perception that mass numbers of administrators are about to retire or are being lured into other careers, and that schools and districts are having a hard time finding qualified people to replace those who leave.

A study conducted by RAND Education for the Wallace-Reader's Digest Funds reviewed and analyzed existing data and found little evidence of a nationwide crisis in the market for certified school administrators. Nevertheless, the study did identify several key areas of concern: a significant portion of the administrative population nearing retirement, substantial variation in career incentives on the state and local levels, and barriers to entry that affect teachers' willingness to become school administrators.

EXISTING DATA REVEAL NO EVIDENCE OF A NATIONAL CRISIS IN THE LABOR MARKET FOR SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS

The Number of Administrators Is Stable Though the Group Is Aging

The study found that, overall, the school administrative profession is currently experiencing neither tremendous growth nor decline. For instance, according to the most recent National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), the number of principals grew by more than 7 percent for public schools and 3 percent for private schools between 1987–1988 and 1999–2000. These national trends obscure important regional variations, however. For example, growth was substantially higher in the West (18 percent for public schools, 13.8 percent for private) than in other regions.

One of the most striking findings of the RAND analysis was that the nation's principals, like its teachers, are growing older as a group. From 1988 to 2000, the average age of principals increased from 47.8 to 49.3 in the public sector and from 46 to 49.9 in the private sector. There has also been a dramatic shift in the age at which people become principals. In 1988, 38 percent of new public school principals (i.e., those with three or fewer years of experience as a principal) were 40 or younger; by 2000, the figure was 12 percent. For new private school principals, the shift was similar but comparatively less dramatic.

There Is Little Evidence That School Administrators Are Being Lured into Other Career Fields at This Time

A review of the rates at which school administrators left the profession did not provide evidence of an exodus from the field. Over the sample period, 1984 to 1999, exit rates ranged from 15 to 33 percent per year nationally, with no regular trend over time. This result was almost matched by that for entry rates, which showed that a similarly large fraction of individuals, 19 to 29 percent, entered school administration each year.

The researchers also examined changes in compensation that could be expected to influence entry into and exit from school administrative careers. Between 1984 and 1999, the salaries of administrators kept pace with those of other managerial professionals whose positions require similar levels of training, and there was no evidence that administrators were leaving to take jobs in other sectors of the economy. Those who left school administration tended to leave the labor force entirely or to return to teaching. On average, those leaving school administration experienced a decrease in wages and in the number of hours per week worked. Thus, it does not appear that school administrators are being lured away to other career fields because of higher pay.

The study did find that the salary gap between public and private school administrators appears to be closing. In 1987–1988, private school principals earned only 49 percent of what public school principals earned; by 1999–2000, that figure had risen to 62 percent. This trend raises the possibility that the competition between private and public schools for administrators will increase in the future.

Principals Are Not Fleeing Schools Serving Disadvantaged Students

There has been considerable concern and anecdotal evidence that certain types of schools, particularly those serving disadvantaged students, are having difficulty attracting and keeping school administrators. The study found little evidence that this is the case. For example, urban schools and schools with a larger proportion of minority, low-income (i.e., enrolled in free and reduced-price lunch programs), or limited English proficient students had principals whose levels of experience were equal to those of principals in suburban schools and schools with a smaller proportion of those students.

Nonetheless, principals' perceptions of school problems were found to vary in systematic ways according to the observable characteristics of their schools. Reports of problems appear to be more severe in public schools, in schools with a higher proportion of low-income students, in high schools, and in schools with larger enrollments. Researchers also found that principals at schools with these characteristics earned more, which may partly compensate for the more challenging environment.

Overall, Individuals Appear to Have Incentives to Move into and Through the Administrative Career Path

According to the data, most school administrators were once teachers. Although salary variations were found to exist across states and schools, principals earned more on average than did experienced teachers in their schools. Public school principals earned 33 percent more than experienced teachers in their schools, while private school principals earned 44 percent more. Thus, there are moderate monetary incentives associated with entering the field.

AGING TRENDS, LOCAL VARIATION IN INCENTIVES, AND BARRIERS TO ENTRY ARE AREAS OF CONCERN

The researchers identified three issues that need to be addressed to ensure a sufficient supply of administrators in the future:

Public school systems need to look for ways to respond to likely increases in the retirement rate for principals. Aging trends among principals could lead to future shortages as more principals become eligible for retirement. This situation may be exacerbated by the tendency of schools and districts to hire older new principals and by the retirement programs themselves, which often create incentives for early retirement. Schools, districts, and states need to address this issue by reaching out to younger people to fill administrative positions while also changing the early-retirement incentives built into their systems.

Data and analyses should focus on the local level to help decisionmakers target their policies to local concerns. In spite of a stable national picture, tremendous variation exists in terms of the incentives available to prospective school administrators at the state, regional, and district levels. As a result, individual schools and districts might have difficulty recruiting and retaining school administrators. The analysis suggests a need to closely monitor local market conditions and personnel management practices in order to craft targeted solutions.

Policymakers should carefully examine entry into the administrative field. Because teaching is by far the most frequent gateway to school administration, schools and districts need to attract high-quality potential administrators into the teaching pool and to provide incentives that will draw some teachers into school administration. In addition, formal barriers (such as certification requirements) and informal barriers (such as district hiring practices) all but exclude people who lack teaching experience from being considered for administrative positions. Thus, if policymakers are serious about drawing people into administration from outside the education field, they must ensure that these barriers are reduced.

RAND research briefs summarize research that has been more fully documented elsewhere. This brief describes work done within RAND Education and documented in Who Is Leading Our Schools? An Overview of School Administrators and Their Careers *by Susan M. Gates, Jeanne Ringel, and Lucrecia Santibanez, MR-1679-EDU, 2003, 258 pp., $28.50, ISBN: 0-8330-3353-0, available from RAND Distribution Services, Telephone: 310-451-7002; FAX: 310-451-6915; or email: order@rand.org. Building on more than 25 years of research and evaluation work, RAND Education has as its mission the improvement of educational policy and practice in formal and informal settings from early childhood on. A profile of RAND Education, abstracts of its publications, and ordering information may be viewed at www.rand.org. Publications are distributed to the trade by NBN. RAND® is a registered trademark. RAND is a nonprofit institution that helps improve public policy and decisionmaking through research and analysis; its publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions or policies of its research sponsors.*

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1700 Main Street, P.O. Box 2138, Santa Monica, California 90407-2138 • Telephone 310-393-0411 • FAX 310-393-4818
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201 North Craig Street, Suite 202, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania 15213-1516 • Telephone 412-683-2300 • FAX 412-683-2800

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